



## Talking About Poverty: News Framing Of Who Is Responsible For Causing And Fixing The Problem

By: Sei-Hill Kim, John P. Carvalho, and **Andrew C. Davis**

### Abstract

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# TALKING ABOUT POVERTY: NEWS FRAMING OF WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CAUSING AND FIXING THE PROBLEM

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With the two recessions in the last ten years, poverty has been on the rise, from about 11% in 2000 to over 13% in 2008.<sup>1</sup> Since the financial crisis of 2008, in particular, renewed attention has been paid to the issue, producing an increasing amount of public and private discussion. At the center of the discussion is the question of who is responsible for causing and fixing the problem. How to define responsibility is important because it may shape the overall policy approach, particularly the domain of society to which the change effort should be applied.<sup>2</sup>

News media play an important role in the process of defining a social problem. The media *frame* an issue in a certain way, telling the audience what is important to know about and how to think about it.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Iyengar has demonstrated that news media can frame questions of responsibility, leading the audience to determine the causes of and solutions for social problems.<sup>4</sup> Analyzing newspaper articles and television news, this study examines how the American news media have presented poverty in their news coverage. More specifically, it looks at how the media frame the question of who is responsible.

Many studies of news framing have examined, in a largely descriptive way, how the media present a certain issue.<sup>5</sup> Some have tested effects on the audience, looking at different types of framing effects, including perceived issue importance<sup>6</sup> and evaluations of election candi-

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dates.<sup>7</sup> Left largely unexplored, as Scheufele points out, is the question of *what makes the media frame an issue in a certain way*.<sup>8</sup> Drawing upon the studies of *agenda building*, our study explores the notion of *frame building*,<sup>9</sup> which addresses the question of what factors may influence the media's selective uses of certain frames. More specifically, we examine a few macro- and micro-level factors of frame building, looking at how these factors interplay with the framing process, shaping the way the media frame the poverty issue.

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## **Frame Building**

While agenda-building studies<sup>10</sup> deal with factors that may influence the media's selection of issues to report, *frame building* addresses how the media select specific frames in presenting the issues.<sup>11</sup> The term *frame building* captures what roles are played by social and structural factors in the media system and by the characteristics of individual journalists in influencing the production and modification of frames.

Based upon the findings from agenda-building studies,<sup>12</sup> Scheufele laid out a number of internal and external factors of news organizations that may affect how journalists frame a given issue.<sup>13</sup> First, *social norms and cultural values* can affect the way an issue is framed. The media tend to portray society as fundamentally sound, attributing most social problems to irresponsible or unfortunate individuals.<sup>14</sup> Problems are considered as personal in nature and disassociated from larger social factors. Supporting the argument, Kim and Willis found that news coverage of obesity tended to focus on individual, rather than societal, causes and solutions largely because the personal-level attributions of responsibility were better fitted to the strong individualism ingrained in American culture.<sup>15</sup>

*Organizational pressures and constraints* are another factor. The overall political orientation or the view of the publisher can be one form of organizational pressure (or norm), often reflected in the editorial tone or the organizational routine of each news organization.<sup>16</sup> Commercial pressures can be another form. News organizations are for-profit organizations; the items that attract larger audiences become a regular choice. Likewise, framing a story in a way that attracts large audiences may become necessary when journalists consider which frames to use. Kim, Carvalho, Davis, and Mullins, for example, found that a large majority of news coverage of illegal immigration framed the problem as a crime issue.<sup>17</sup> Linking illegal immigration to a crime story must be a preferred way of framing the issue because it will necessarily involve drama, conflict, good, and evil—the ingredients to attract a larger audience.

*Pressures from interest groups* also can be considered as a frame-building factor. Interest groups, according to Edelman, "categorize beliefs in a way that marshals support and opposition to their interests."<sup>18</sup> In an effort to construct public opinion, interest groups seek to use the media as tools to establish certain frames of reference. Frames advocated by interest groups as sound bites are often adopted by journalists and incorporated into their news coverage.<sup>19</sup> As Gamson and Modigliani posit, the media's selection of specific frames can be accounted for by

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the interplay between journalistic norms and the influences of interest groups.<sup>20</sup>

The way news is framed can be an outcome of *professional routines* of journalists.<sup>21</sup> Reliance on routine sources, such as government officials, press releases, and press conferences, is typical.<sup>22</sup> Another routine is the frequent use of *episodic framing*. Episodic framing involves storytelling, in which a topic is presented in a specific event or in a personal case. *Thematic framing*, on the other hand, places a topic in a larger and more abstract social context. While episodic framing is relatively easier to prepare, thematic framing requires a significant amount of background research and data collection. For journalists operating under tight time constraints, episodic framing is the preferred way to prepare a story.<sup>23</sup> Episodic framing is also preferred because it often includes human interest stories, an easier way to attract large audiences.

Finally, and perhaps most important, *the characteristics of individual journalists* can play an important role in deciding how to frame a story.<sup>24</sup> Selection of a specific frame is moderated by such factors as social and political ideologies, attitudes, and professional norms, the factors that are often reflected in the way journalists make sense of the issue and construct a story.<sup>25</sup>

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News media seek to reduce the complexity of the issues by presenting them in easy-to-understand interpretive packages. Framing serves as a packaging process, which involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient, while leaving other aspects out of the package.<sup>26</sup> It is in this selection process that the media promote a particular problem definition, leading the audience to make attributions of responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

Attributions of responsibility can be categorized into two types: causal and treatment responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> Causal responsibility deals with the source of the problem, while treatment responsibility focuses on who has the power or the responsibility to alleviate the problem. More simply put, causal responsibility addresses the question of who causes the problem, while treatment responsibility identifies who should be held responsible for solving it. These two definitions of responsibility are particularly useful in understanding public dialogues on social problems. Social problems are inherently political in nature, involving compromise and conciliation of competing interests.<sup>29</sup> It is critically important for these competing interests to be able to successfully define the responsibility because it will eventually determine which interest (e.g., the government, industry, or individual citizens) should be held responsible for fixing the problem.<sup>30</sup>

The discussion of responsibility involves two conflicting views.<sup>31</sup> One view holds that a social problem is caused largely by the deficiencies of individuals, often those who are affected by the problem. Because the problem is considered as resulting from flaws in individual behaviors, change efforts tend to focus on modifications of the problematic behaviors. According to the other view, a social problem results pri-

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## **Framing Responsibility**

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marily from flaws in social and environmental conditions, such as unequal distribution of economic resources, unsafe environments, or unethical business practices. Remedies require changes in government policies, business practices, and/or other larger social forces.<sup>32</sup>

News media are often criticized for reducing important social issues to mere individual-level problems.<sup>33</sup> Social responsibilities are largely ignored, while individual causes and solutions are repeatedly emphasized. There are several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis on individual responsibility may well reflect the strong individualism of the American culture.<sup>34</sup> Second, societal approaches are often considered too radical either politically or economically, and are thus rejected in news coverage in favor of less drastic measures, like changing individual behaviors.<sup>35</sup> Prescriptions for such "societal remedies" include, for example, new laws, new taxes, and new regulations. Finally, news coverage of social problems is typically *episodic*, focusing largely on a specific event that has happened to certain individuals.<sup>36</sup> It is in this act of presenting a specific event that the media necessarily divert attention from social conditions and instead focus more on individual accountabilities.<sup>37</sup>

While some researchers assume that the media play an active role in shaping people's understanding of who is responsible,<sup>38</sup> a recent study by Kensicki brings into question the media's role.<sup>39</sup> Her content analysis of news articles about poverty, pollution, and incarceration indicated that news coverage was overwhelmingly "neutral," and rarely suggested any causes, effects, or responsible agent for the problems. Through the overwhelming uses of neutral frames, she concludes, newspapers have promoted general political apathy among readers, creating a disconnection between the problem and actual ramifications.

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### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Our research question (RQ) and the first hypothesis explore how the media frame the question of who is responsible for poverty:

**RQ:** How have the media presented the causes and solutions to poverty? Have certain causes and solutions appeared more often than others?

**H1:** News coverage of poverty will be more likely to attribute responsibility to individuals than to society.

It can be hypothesized that the overall political orientations of news organizations (i.e., the view of the publisher) affect the frame building process. Conservatism, for example, emphasizes individual freedom and responsibility and advocates limited government regulations. Conservative papers, therefore, may likely define poverty as an individual matter. Liberal papers, on the other hand, will be more likely to call for greater government involvement and societal approaches.

**H2a:** Conservative papers will be more likely than liberal papers to attribute responsibility to individuals.

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**H2b:** Liberal papers will be more likely than conservative papers to attribute responsibility to society.

Compared to newspapers, television is distinctively episodic and event-oriented.<sup>40</sup> By presenting news episodically, television necessarily focuses on what happened to an individual, displacing attention to larger social conditions. It is likely that the poor are frequently seen as being responsible for causing and solving their own financial hardship; at the same time, attention is diverted from potential systemic or institutional causes of suffering.<sup>41</sup> We hypothesize that the emphasis on personal-level responsibility would be greater in television than in newspapers:

**H3a:** Television news will be more likely than newspapers to attribute responsibility to individuals.

**H3b:** Newspapers will be more likely than television news to attribute responsibility to society.

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## Methods

**Sample.** In order to select the newspapers to analyze, we first selected four states from the top ten in median household income (Minnesota, Massachusetts, Virginia, Colorado) and four states from the bottom ten (New Mexico, Oklahoma, Alabama, West Virginia), based on a three-year-average (2004-2006).<sup>42</sup> In selecting these states, we also tried to include as many different regions of the country as possible. We then selected one newspaper from each state, based on its history, circulation size, and availability in the *LexisNexis* database: *Star Tribune* (Minnesota), *Boston Globe* (Massachusetts), *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Virginia), *Denver Post* (Colorado), the *Tulsa World* (Oklahoma), *Birmingham News* (Alabama), *Charleston Gazette* (West Virginia). Because New Mexican newspapers had a relatively small number of poverty articles, we included two newspapers from that state—instead of one—(the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Albuquerque Journal*). The *Tulsa World*, *Birmingham News*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *Richmond Times Dispatch* endorsed the Republican candidate in the past three presidential elections, and thus were categorized as conservative newspapers. The *Charleston Gazette*, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Boston Globe*, and *Star Tribune* endorsed the Democratic candidate in the past presidential elections, and thus were categorized as liberal newspapers. The *Denver Post* endorsed Gore in 2000, Bush in 2004, and Obama in 2008, and also was categorized as a liberal paper.<sup>43</sup> As far as television news, we selected three broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) and one cable news channel (CNN).

Our analysis included news stories published or aired between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 2007. The years 1993 to 2000 represent the tenure of the Clinton administration, during which the economy was showing continued growth. During the remaining seven years (the Bush administration, 2001 to 2007), on the other hand, the economy

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struggled with two recessions. The fifteen-year time period was selected in order to include years when the economy was strong and when it was struggling.

The actual news data for the study came from a keyword search of the *LexisNexis* database.<sup>44</sup> Using the keyword "poverty" appearing in the headline, we retrieved stories about poverty in the nine newspapers and four television channels. The search yielded a total of 1,028 news articles and 402 transcripts. By checking through the headline of each story, we first sorted out unrelated items, including stories about poverty in other countries and duplicates (the same article appearing in different weekly editions or as a tease for later in the program). About 53.9% ( $N = 771$ ) were unrelated items and thus eliminated in this first-round filtering. For the newspapers and television channels that yielded more than sixty stories after the filtering, we randomly selected sixty to analyze. If the filtered stories numbered fewer than sixty, we analyzed them all. As our analysis proceeded, we were able to further sort out a small number of unrelated items. The final number of items analyzed was 506 (395 articles and 111 transcripts).

**Coding.** Table 1 illustrates how the coding instrument specified what may constitute each potential cause or solution to poverty. Attributions of *causal* responsibility were categorized into personal and societal causes. Personal-level causes included individual behaviors, lifestyles, and other factors that might be responsible for poverty. These personal attributions were categorized into one of five causes: *Making a bad choice*, *Broken family*, *Lack of education*, *Physical conditions*, and *Immigration* (see Table 1 for details). Societal-level causes, on the other hand, were the social, economic, and political factors that might contribute to the poverty problem. These societal reasons were also categorized into five causes: *Bad economy*, *Inadequate pay*, *Ineffective government aid*, *Lack of education support*, and *Racism*.

Attributions of *solution* responsibility were also categorized into personal and societal solutions (see Table 1). Personal-level solutions included two categories, including *Making better choices* and *Education*. Societal-level solutions had six categories: *Better economic policies*, *Higher minimum wage*, *Reforming government aid programs*, *Greater support for education*, *Charities*, and *Tax reform*, which covered a variety of government programs, policy changes, and educational support that would improve the economic condition of the poor. Causes and solutions that appeared only a few times were all categorized into *Others*.

The entire text of each article and transcript was examined for the attributions of responsibility. Two coders coded the articles and transcripts after having conducted a series of training and pilot-test sessions. We calculated intercoder reliability by double-coding a random subsample ( $N = 75$  or 15%) of the data. Intercoder reliability corrected for agreement by chance (Scott's *pi*) ranged from .71 to .89 with an average reliability of .79.

Two coders first examined whether each article and program mentioned any one or more of the six personal and six societal causes. Each cause was coded as "not present" (0) or "present" (1). Coders then deter-

**TABLE 1**  
*Attributions of Causal and Solution Responsibility*  
*(Coding and Intercoder Reliability)*

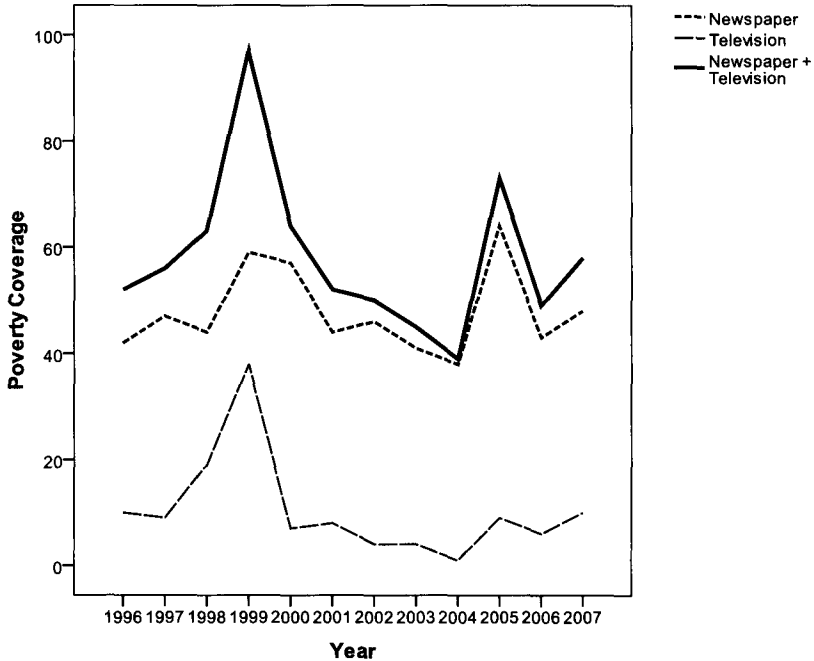
Causal Responsibility	Solution Responsibility
<p><b>Personal-level causes of poverty (Scott's <math>pi = .76</math>)</b></p> <p>Making a bad choice: Poor money management; being lazy; alcohol/drug abuse; criminal record/behavior; etc.</p> <p>Broken family: Teen pregnancy; being a single parent; divorce; having too many children; etc.</p> <p>Lack of education: Dropping out of school; unskilled; etc.</p> <p>Physical conditions: Disabled; health problems; too old to work; etc.</p> <p>Immigration: Visa status; language barrier, etc.</p> <p>Others: Being victimized; lack of religious belief; etc.</p>	<p><b>Personal-level solutions to poverty (Scott's <math>pi = .83</math>)</b></p> <p>Making better choices: Planned money management; stop abusing alcohol/drugs; looking out for job opportunities; etc.</p> <p>Education: Complete high school; learn job skills; etc.</p> <p>Others: Abstinence; being religious; learn English; etc.</p>
<p><b>Societal-level causes of poverty (Scott's <math>pi = .83</math>)</b></p> <p>Bad economy: Recession; unemployment; failed economic policies; etc.</p> <p>Inadequate pay: Businesses offering unreasonably low salaries; minimum wage is too low; etc.</p> <p>Ineffective government aid: Problems in welfare programs; aid programs designed to make people lazy; etc.</p> <p>Lack of education support: Lack of funding for educating underprivileged children; lack of job education opportunities; etc.</p> <p>Racism: Discrimination in job opportunity, in compensation; etc.</p> <p>Others: Problems in the tax system; social Darwinism; etc.</p>	<p><b>Societal-level solutions to poverty (Scott's <math>pi = .73</math>)</b></p> <p>Better economic policies: Create more jobs; boost the economy; better economic policies; etc.</p> <p>Higher minimum wage: Raise the minimum wage; etc.</p> <p>Reforming government aid programs: Restructuring aid programs; etc.</p> <p>Greater support for education: Higher education opportunities for low-income families; make job education opportunities more available and accessible; etc.</p> <p>Charities: Religious, charity organizations being responsible for helping the poor; etc.</p> <p>Tax reform: Fair and reasonable tax rates for low-income families; restructuring the tax system, etc.</p> <p>Others: Eradicating racism; control illegal immigration; etc.</p>

mined how many mentions of personal and societal causes were made in each news report. While some articles and programs contained no mention of either personal or societal causes, there were also many items mentioning more than one of the six personal and six societal causes. In many cases, the same cause was mentioned more than once in a single news story. No matter how many mentions were made, we counted them as one mention if they came from the same article or program. This allowed us to avoid unnecessarily inflating the number of mentions made of a particular cause. Using the same method, coders also counted how many personal and societal solutions were mentioned in each news story.



**FIGURE 1**

*The Amount of Newspaper and TV News Coverage of Poverty*



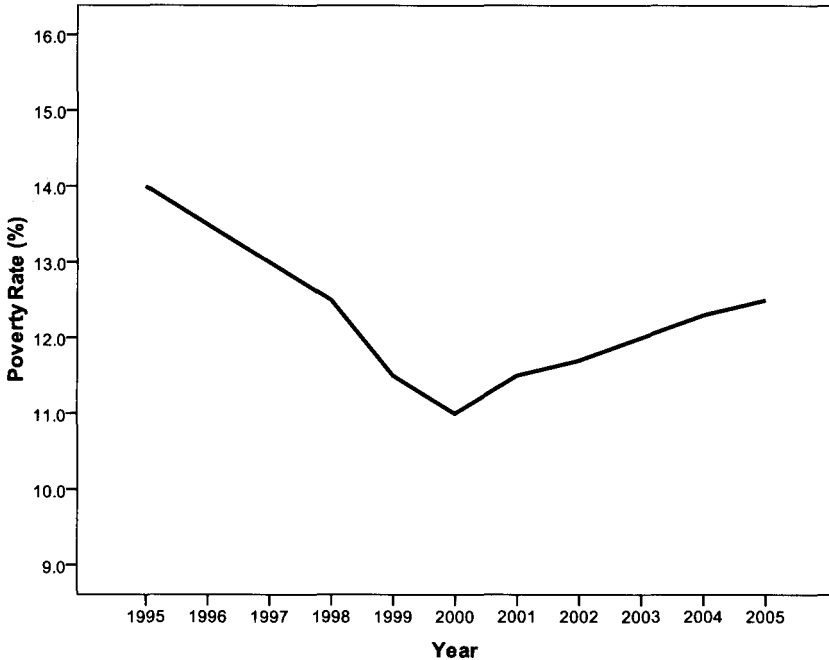
*Note:* The amount of newspaper coverage includes articles from the *Tulsa World*, *Birmingham News*, *Albuquerque Journal*, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, the *Charleston Gazette*, the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Denver Post*, and *Star Tribune* matching the key word “poverty” appearing in the headline, after sorting out unrelated items (the first-round filtering). The amount of television news contains news programs from ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN matching the same keyword.

## Findings

Figure 1 presents the total number of news stories between 1993 and 2007 matching the keyword “poverty” appearing in the headline. As shown in the figure, the amount of news coverage has been cyclical, with a couple of ups-and-downs during the fifteen-year period. A quick comparison with Figure 2 (poverty rate) demonstrates that the amount of news coverage does not necessarily correspond to changes in the poverty rate. While the poverty rate was declining between 1995 and 1999, for example, the amount of news coverage was, in fact, increasing during the same time period. The figures also show that the amount of news coverage declined between 2000 and 2004, during which the poverty rate was indeed on the rise.

Our research question (RQ) addresses whether certain causes and solutions have appeared more often than others. The first hypothesis (H1), in particular, examines whether the media have focused more on personal causes and solutions than on societal-level attributions. Table 2 shows that both newspapers and television mentioned *broken family* most

**FIGURE 2**  
*Poverty Rate\**



\*Source: U.S. Census Bureau ([www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf)).

often as a personal cause of poverty (sixty out of 506 stories, or 11.9%). Following next were *lack of education* and *physical conditions*, which appeared in a total of thirty-three (6.5%) and twenty-five (4.9%) stories respectively. *Making a bad choice* and *immigration* were mentioned less often, both appearing only sixteen (3.2%) times. Table 3 shows that the most frequently mentioned societal cause was *bad economy* ( $N = 55$ , 10.9%), followed by *inadequate pay* ( $N = 45$ , 8.9%) and *ineffective government aid programs* ( $N = 44$ , 8.7%). *Lack of education support* and *racism* were mentioned less often (fourteen and nine mentions respectively), accounting for only 2.8% and 1.8% of the total news stories.

Table 4 shows that *education* was the most frequently mentioned personal solution, appearing in forty-one (8.1%) articles and transcripts. *Making better choices* was found less often ( $N = 20$ ), accounting for 4.0% of the entire news stories. When it comes to societal-level attributions (see Table 5), *greater support for education* and *better economic policies* were mentioned most often, appearing ninety-four (18.6%) and seventy-three (14.4%) times. Attributions of responsibility to *charities* or to *reforming government aid programs* were found less often (fifty-eight and forty-three), accounting for about 11.5% and 8.5% of the news stories. *Higher minimum wage* ( $N = 26$ ) and *Tax reform* ( $N = 23$ ) were mentioned far less frequently.

**TABLE 2**  
*Attributions of Personal-level Causal Responsibility in News Coverage of Poverty*  
(1993-2007)

Media (N)	Personal-Level Causes						Total
	Making a Bad Choice	Broken Family	Lack of Education	Physical Condi- tions	Immi- gration	Others	
Conservative Newspapers							
The Tulsa World (53)	0	4	5	2	1	0	12
Birmingham News (52)	3	8	7	5	0	0	23
Albuquerque Journal (29)	1	4	2	1	3	2	13
Richmond Times Dispatch (43)	2	6	2	4	2	4	20
Total (177)	6	22	16	12	6	6	68
Liberal Newspapers							
The Charleston Gazette (50)	2	7	2	2	1	0	14
The Santa Fe New Mexican (19)	0	1	1	1	0	0	3
The Boston Globe (52)	0	5	3	0	2	0	10
The Denver Post (46)	1	4	3	2	1	0	11
Star Tribune (51)	4	9	3	2	3	0	21
Total (218)	7	26	12	7	7	0	59
NP Total (395)	13	48	28	19	13	6	127
Television							
ABC (15)	0	2	0	1	0	3	6
NBC (16)	0	1	0	2	0	2	5
CBS (34)	0	5	0	1	2	2	10
CNN (46)	3	4	5	2	1	5	20
TV Total (111)	3	12	5	6	3	12	41
Media Total (506)	16	60	33	25	16	18	168

*Note:* Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each cause of poverty.

Taken together, references to personal causes and solutions were made a total of 240 times (168 mentions of personal causes and seventy-two mentions of personal solutions, see Tables 2 and 4) with an average of .47 mentions in each news story (240 mentions in 506 articles and transcripts). Societal attributions of responsibility appeared much more often (202 mentions of societal causes and 375 mentions of societal solutions) with an average of 1.14 mentions per news report (see Tables 3 and 5). A *paired-sample t-test* indicated that the difference was statistically significant ( $t = 10.874, p < .001$ ); but the finding was in fact counter-hypothetical. Contrary to what we predicted in H1, the media's attributions of responsibility were largely societal, focusing more on social causes and solutions.

H2a and H2b examine whether conservative and liberal newspapers are different in terms of attributions of responsibility. Tables 2 and 4 show that conservative papers made sixty-eight mentions of personal causes and twenty-three mentions of personal solutions with an average of .51

**TABLE 3**  
*Attributions of Societal-level Causal Responsibility in News Coverage of Poverty*  
(1993-2007)

Media (N)	Societal-Level Causes						Total
	Bad Economy	Inadequate Pay	Ineffective Govt. Aid	Lack of Education Support	Racism	Others	
Conservative Newspapers							
The Tulsa World (53)	6	5	3	2	0	2	18
Birmingham News (52)	2	4	2	4	1	1	14
Albuquerque Journal (29)	0	2	2	0	0	0	4
Richmond Times Dispatch (43)	2	5	1	0	1	4	13
Total (177)	10	16	8	6	2	7	49
Liberal Newspapers							
The Charleston Gazette (50)	4	2	4	1	3	6	20
The Santa Fe New Mexican (19)	2	0	1	0	1	4	8
The Boston Globe (52)	9	7	12	2	0	4	34
The Denver Post (46)	1	1	3	1	1	8	15
Star Tribune (51)	14	8	10	1	0	5	38
Total (218)	30	18	30	5	5	27	115
NP Total (395)	40	34	38	11	7	34	164
Television							
ABC (15)	3	2	0	0	0	0	5
NBC (16)	1	1	1	0	2	1	6
CBS (34)	3	3	3	1	0	0	10
CNN (46)	8	5	2	2	0	0	17
TV Total (111)	15	11	6	3	2	1	38
Media Total (506)	55	45	44	14	9	35	202

*Note:* Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each cause of poverty.

mentions per story (a total of ninety-one mentions in 177 articles). Liberal papers, on the other hand, made fifty-nine mentions of personal causes and twenty-nine mentions of personal solutions in their 218 articles, which was an average of .40 mentions in each article. Therefore, conservative newspapers mentioned personal causes and solutions slightly more often than liberal papers (.51 vs. .40). The difference, however, was not statistically significant. **H2a** was not supported. When it comes to societal attributions (see Tables 3 and 5), liberal newspapers, as predicted in **H2b**, made more references to social causes and solutions ( $M = 1.39$ ) than did conservative papers ( $M = .93$ ). This difference was statistically significant ( $t = 4.080, p < .001$ ), supporting **H2b**.

Our last two hypotheses address whether there is a difference between television and newspapers in the way they attribute responsibility. Television made slightly more frequent mentions of personal causes and solutions ( $M = .55$ ) than did newspapers ( $M = .45$ ). The

**TABLE 4**  
*Attributions of Personal-level Solution Responsibility in News Coverage of Poverty*  
 (1993-2007)

Media (N)	<u>Personal-Level Solutions</u>			
	Making Better Choices	Education	Others	Total
<b>Conservative Newspapers</b>				
The Tulsa World (53)	2	4	0	6
Birmingham News (52)	1	5	0	6
Albuquerque Journal (29)	0	0	2	2
Richmond Times Dispatch (43)	4	3	2	9
Total (177)	7	12	4	23
<b>Liberal Newspapers</b>				
The Charleston Gazette (50)	0	1	0	1
The Santa Fe New Mexican (19)	0	1	0	1
The Boston Globe (52)	3	5	1	9
The Denver Post (46)	1	2	1	4
Star Tribune (51)	5	9	0	14
Total (218)	9	18	2	29
NP Total (395)	16	30	6	52
<b>Television</b>				
ABC (15)	0	1	1	2
NBC (16)	1	1	0	2
CBS (34)	0	3	1	4
CNN (46)	3	6	3	12
TV Total (111)	4	11	5	20
Media Total (506)	20	41	11	72

*Note:* Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each solution to poverty.

difference, however, was not statistically significant. **H3a** was not supported. As far as societal attributions, newspapers made more frequent references to social causes and solutions ( $M = 1.19$ ) than did television ( $M = .97$ ), although the size of the difference approached but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ( $t = 1.724, p = .085$ ). **H3b** was supported only marginally.

## Discussion

Analyzing news articles and transcripts, we explored how American news media have framed the issue of poverty. More specifically, our study examined how the media presented the questions of what were the causes and how to fix the problem. We also explored the notion of frame building, looking at the factors that might influence the way an issue is framed. What do our findings tell us about news coverage of poverty? How does this study contribute to the framing literature?

We first found that the amount of poverty coverage was not closely correlated with the actual prominence of the problem (poverty rate). The amount was rather influenced by newsworthy events that could

**TABLE 5**  
*Attributions of Societal-level Solution Responsibility in News Coverage of Poverty*  
 (1993-2007)

Media (N)	Societal-Level Solutions							Total
	Better Econo- mic Policies	Higher Mini- mum Wage	Reform- ing Govt. Aid Programs	Greater Support for Education	Charities	Tax Reform	Others	
Conservative Newspapers								
The Tulsa World (53)	7	1	4	7	8	3	10	40
Birmingham News (52)	5	0	3	7	9	1	3	28
Albuquerque Journal (29)	1	3	5	10	3	2	9	33
Richmond Times Dispatch (43)	1	2	1	4	4	0	3	15
Total (177)	14	6	13	28	24	6	25	116
Liberal Newspapers								
The Charleston Gazette (50)	11	4	8	8	4	4	3	42
The Santa Fe New Mexican (19)	1	1	0	3	0	1	4	10
The Boston Globe (52)	7	4	8	16	7	1	7	50
The Denver Post (46)	6	2	4	12	7	0	7	38
Star Tribune (51)	10	3	5	11	8	2	10	49
Total (218)	35	14	25	50	26	8	31	189
NP Total (395)	49	20	38	78	50	14	56	305
Television								
ABC (15)	3	1	1	1	2	2	0	10
NBC (16)	3	0	1	0	1	0	0	5
CBS (34)	3	0	0	5	2	0	1	11
CNN (46)	15	5	3	10	3	7	1	44
TV Total (111)	24	6	5	16	8	9	2	70
Media Total (506)	73	26	43	94	58	23	58	375

*Note:* Entries are the number of news articles and transcripts mentioning each solution to poverty.

draw the public's attention. The large increase in news coverage in 1999 (see Figure 1), for example, can be explained by the fact that the year was when President Clinton began his *poverty tour*, in which he promoted a plan for attracting jobs and investment to the economically depressed regions of the country. The year 2005, which showed another increase in coverage, was when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, drawing renewed attention to the poverty problem. This finding is consistent with the agenda-building literature showing that the amount of news coverage does not necessarily correspond to the actual seriousness of a problem.<sup>45</sup> Even though poverty has been an issue for a long time, it seems to be the authority of political figures and the newsworthiness of dramatic events that can define the issue as a social problem important enough to deserve great media attention.

An interesting finding of this study is that the most frequently mentioned causal attribution was *broken family*, with teen pregnancy or

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being promiscuous cast as the major cause of poverty. This is not a new finding; previous studies have reported that the media portray the poor not only as lazy, but also as sexually irresponsible.<sup>46</sup> Frequently linking poverty to irresponsible sexual behavior is problematic for several reasons. First, there is little evidence to support a close connection between the two. According to the Alabama Poverty Project, the fertility rate of women living on welfare is lower than the overall fertility rate of American women of child-bearing age.<sup>47</sup> Second, the claim that links poverty to being sexually irresponsible contains religious overtones, implying that the poor have done something immoral that makes them deserve the poverty in which they live. This unsubstantiated claim can further reinforce the "welfare queen" stereotype that depicts poor people as mostly single mothers who choose to be in that position. Finally, deriving the cause from immoral behaviors can lead to flawed conclusions. For example, can people avoid becoming poor simply by waiting until after high school to have a child? Interestingly, while many news stories mentioned teen pregnancy as a cause of poverty, rarely did they discuss abstinence as a way to solve the problem.

Our findings also tell us about the factors that may affect the media's selective uses of certain frames. Given the strong individualism of the American culture, we expected that the media would focus more on individual accountability than on societal responsibilities. Contrary to what we expected, however, mentions of societal causes and solutions significantly outnumbered the references made to personal responsibilities. There are several explanations. First, it is possible that the predispositions of individual journalists play a more important role beyond and above the influence of the individualistic culture. American journalists who cover political news are known to be predominantly liberal in political views when compared to the general population.<sup>48</sup> Research also shows that journalists' own political views can influence news coverage, though the influence tends to be subtle rather than overt.<sup>49</sup> The liberal ideology may have led journalists to focus on greater government involvement, calling for more societal approaches. Second, poverty stories are often found when the government or community organizations announce new anti-poverty initiatives. Because these initiatives are focused largely on rectifying social and structural sources of poverty, they often provide journalists with a large amount of news material that involves societal causes and solutions. Lastly, a significant number of poverty stories were reported when there was a large-scale natural disaster. Given the nature of the circumstance, it would be unlikely for news writers to blame the victims themselves for their situation. Instead, the local government and the community as a whole are often blamed for being unprepared.

Even though the liberal ideology of news writers might be an important factor affecting frame building, it clearly was not *the only* factor. The overall political leanings of news organizations (i.e., the view of the publisher) also affected which level of responsibility will be selected. We found that conservative newspapers, when compared to liberal papers, were significantly less likely to mention societal causes and solutions.

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That is, the unbalanced emphasis on social responsibility was considerably smaller among conservative newspapers, indicating that organizational pressures can also play a role. The political orientation of the organization may become a powerful influence as it becomes a form of organizational pressure. It is likely that conservative publishers' deeper financial and organizational resources for skilled management put a limit on how far to the left their employees can go on the ideological spectrum.<sup>50</sup>

Episodic framing of the issues, or focusing on personal stories rather than social backgrounds, is a kind of professional routine for the American news media.<sup>51</sup> A necessary consequence of episodic framing is to displace attention away from larger social conditions, placing people—rather than society—at the center of discussing how to solve a problem. We hypothesized that if this routine practice does affect which frames will be selected, television would be less likely than newspapers to emphasize societal causes and solutions. Compared to newspapers, television is much more event-oriented. Television is a story teller. By and large, it does not cover the issues; it tells stories.<sup>52</sup> It is in this process of telling stories that television diverts attention from systemic and institutional responsibilities.<sup>53</sup> Supporting the hypothesis, we found that television was slightly less likely to assign responsibility to society. Though the finding was only marginally significant, it provides at least some evidence that the professional routine of news media—as being episodic and event-oriented—may affect the media's selective use of one frame over another.

While previous research has focused largely on stereotypical portrayals of the poor,<sup>54</sup> our study offers an analysis of how the media present the question of *responsibility*. In particular, we examined an important function of news framing: diagnosing the causes and suggesting solutions.<sup>55</sup> What then are some potential effects of such framing on the audience? Does news coverage of poverty affect people's perceptions of who is responsible? Is this perceived responsibility in turn related to the public's attitudes toward the poor? More important, do the different ways to talk about poverty influence people's support for government aid to the poor? Future research building on our findings needs to explore such consequences of responsibility framing, looking directly at the impact of news coverage on the public's perceptions and attitudes.

It will also be important to examine whether the typical ways poverty is framed are driven by politicians. To what extent do the media parrot what politicians tell them about poverty? Or is there a mutually reinforcing relationship between politicians' and the media's uses of frames? According to the *indexing* hypothesis,<sup>56</sup> news professionals tend to "index" the range of viewpoints according to the range of views expressed in the mainstream government debate. Other studies, however, reported that news media operate somewhat independently, often adopting a set of frames different from that of politicians and interest groups.<sup>57</sup> Future research needs to explore in detail the interplay among the media, politicians, and interest groups



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in the process of framing building, looking at how these players influence one another to shape the public discourse on the poverty issue.

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